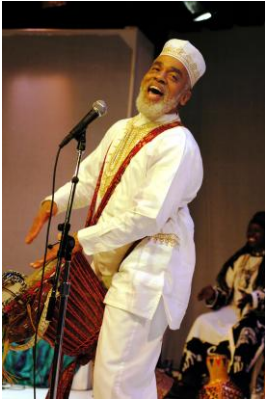


Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Tejumola Ologboni, (b. 1945) comes from a long family line of storytellers. “I grew up in semi-rural Kansas and spent summers in Arkansas on my grandparents’ “dirt” farm. Whenever I would get caught in the midst of mischief, I would always get a story related to my misdeed before receiving my punishment. As children, our after school entertainment would be family storytelling sessions. My sisters, brother, schoolmates and I would sit listening to our parents tell tales. It is from these people that I learned storytelling.” Favorite stories for Teju featured Brother (Brer) Rabbit, the Monkey and the Lion, the Rabbit and the Elephant, High John the Conqueror, Big Boy, and John Henry as well as Bible parables retold from the pulpit by his grandfather Pastor “Poppa” Scott.

Teju values the art of storytelling as one of the oldest ways in which groups transmit key cultural concepts and their worldview. For him, traditional storytelling is “a cultural preserver, an educational tool, and a repository of history.” He believes that being a storyteller differs from being an actor, comedian, motivational speaker, philosopher, or entertainer yet involves all of these roles. His repertoire includes personal experience stories, Bible stories, and traditional African and African American tales and history.

Teju’s apprentice, Benjamin Watson, is a Milwaukee man who uses storytelling in his work with at-risk youth. During instruction, Teju focused on the connection between personal experience with family traditions and regional characteristics. For Benjamin, this meant connecting his Mississippi Delta roots to his Milwaukee urban experience. The two worked closely together and attended storytelling events to study style and content differences at places like **the** Indian Summer Festival and **the** Wisconsin Black Historical Society.

This experience moved Benjamin to redefine “storyteller” - not as a teller of various plots but as “a Keeper of the Culture.” He has strong goals for his learning. “Teju said that storytelling can cross cultural lines, erase cultural barriers and help us understand the richness of ours and everybody else’s culture so we can understand that basically all people are one. I plan to use what I learn to keep pushing that agenda.”

“It is through storytelling that the young have an opportunity to appreciate the wisdom of the elders and the richness of the tradition. This is vital to my community and to all other communities as well.” Teju Ologboni